

# On the Avenue of the Mystery

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The Postwar Counterculture in Novels  
and Film

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## Chapter 2

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The Sands of Abjection in *The Sheltering Sky*

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## 2 The Sands of Abjection in *The Sheltering Sky*

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,  
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven  
That has expelled us and our images.

Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*

When Bernardo Bertolucci set out to make a film of Paul Bowles' fascinating novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), he had an advantage enjoyed by none of the other filmmakers discussed in this book: the onscreen participation of the author, whose dapper seventy-nine-year-old presence graces three scenes at the beginning and end of the film, and whose voice on the soundtrack lends its aura to three recitations from the text. Although Bowles would be unhappy with the result, at least to judge from his subsequent remarks ("the less said about the film now, the better"), he nevertheless gave a willing boost to the director's effort to exploit his image and tacitly countenanced the similar use of his late wife's through the recreation of her distinctive hairstyle atop Debra Winger's head.<sup>1</sup> Whatever Bowles may have hoped for from Bertolucci, it's clear that what Bertolucci wanted from Bowles was the luster of his notoriety, however atypical an iconoclast he may have been.

The association between Bowles and the postwar counterculture was fixed by some widely reprinted photographs from the summer of 1961, in which he appears alongside Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and other Beat figures in Tangier. Yet even here the differences are apparent. Bowles stands out from his visitors in a Panama suit and rep tie, looking less like a countercultural icon than like a stock Hollywood character—the dissolute gentleman washed up in a sweltering equatorial capital. Next to him, even Burroughs appears underdressed. A little earlier, Norman Mailer's assessment, first published in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) and relentlessly quoted in every significant article on Bowles to appear over the next few decades, had done much to establish his countercultural

credentials: “Paul Bowles opened the world of Hip. He let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square (Port Moresby), the call of the orgy, the end of civilization.”<sup>2</sup> Nine out of every ten times that these remarks have appeared, the parenthesis has been replaced by an ellipsis, possibly because Mailer was so obviously wrong on that specific point (in *The Sheltering Sky*, it’s Tunner, not Port Moresby, who’s the square), and the off-base aside makes the larger claim seem indiscriminate. Though unflinching in receiving guests of every conceivable description, Bowles himself was not exactly an enthusiast of the new cultural currents spilling into his remote outpost. In a letter to his mother, he gave free rein to his fastidiousness: “The beats have invaded Tangier at last. Every day one sees more beards and filthy blue jeans, and the girls look like escapees from lunatic asylums.”<sup>3</sup>

These differences in personal style extend to his prose, which delivers its often shocking subject matter with a restraint and elegance markedly removed from the exuberant spontaneity and shameless self-exposure of Ginsberg and the others. In his writing, as in the music that he composed professionally for many years, Bowles strove for maximal effects by minimal means, according to an aesthetic more typically French than American; and it’s unsurprising to learn that his early enthusiasms were focused on Paris or that some of his first publications were even written in French. More than any English-speaking writer, one is reminded of his Parisian contemporaries, the dissident surrealists, who also specialized in rendering startling obscenities in notably refined language.

The perceived affinity between Bowles and the counterculture is no misconception, however, and it may be that his disaffection with the world he was born into was even more thoroughgoing than that of his younger associates. It’s evident above all in his half-century-plus residence in North Africa, where he settled after the war and remained until his death in 1999. In a documentary shot near the end of his life, he placidly suggests that living in a city like Tangier is good practice for the day Western civilization destroys itself, although he allows that he won’t be around to witness that event (advice to the young, one assumes).<sup>4</sup> Together with the author’s personal history, such sentiments call to mind the introduction of this theme, both in the novel and in Bertolucci’s film version of *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), through a distinction between the tourist and the traveler. Early in the novel, with the characters recently arrived in North Africa, we learn that Port Moresby is fond of elaborating his pet comparison in point-by-point fashion, and the film conveys the established quality of the idea by having his wife, Kit, introduce it and Port take it up on cue. The tourist, we are told, “generally hurries back home after a few weeks or months,” whereas the traveler, “belonging to no one place more than the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another” (6). Port considers himself a traveler, of course, and in the film the ensuing dialogue helpfully specifies that Tunner, snapping pictures on the dock, is a tourist and that

Kit, by her own estimate, is “half and half.” The novel takes the comparison a step farther:

another important difference between tourist and traveler is that the former accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveler, who compares it with the others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking. And the war was one facet of the mechanized age he wanted to forget.<sup>5</sup>

(6)

With its explicit link between the countercultural impulse and the disasters of the Second World War, the scene offers a natural point of departure for this study. In the aftermath of a war, Kit observes, mostly to please her husband, “The people of each country get more like the people of every other country. They have no character, no beauty, no ideals, no culture—nothing, nothing.” Port is happy to agree and adds: “Everything’s getting gray, and it’ll be grayer. But some places’ll withstand the malady longer than you think” (8). Bowles was hardly the first to compare the underdeveloped and developed worlds to the disadvantage of the latter, whose depressing reach is evident in the intrusion of the coloratura soprano’s aria—especially irritating to the modernist composer that he was—and in the nondescript European clothes worn by the Arabs on the terrace of the Café d’Eckmühl-Noiseux.<sup>6</sup> But while the very existence of this shabby establishment reminds us that Western culture was steadily overrunning the rest of the world, the lumped-together names alluding to the recent combatants underscore the evidence throughout the scene that Bowles was among those who viewed the war as a defining moment. To him and to others of his mind, it seemed obvious that the forces of “the mechanized age” were collectively advancing toward their own destruction and therefore had to be, if not entirely avoided, then at least kept at a distance for as long as possible. Once only a personal preference, homelessness would be henceforth a necessity, and in that one respect the difference between the author and his alienated protagonist is not great.

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Perhaps due to its intercultural erotic encounters and atmosphere of sophisticated despair, *The Sheltering Sky* was an unexpected bestseller in midcentury America, a novel accidentally attuned to its moment; and Bertolucci’s film concentrates on those aspects of the book that, as an early reviewer put it, seemed to have “met the French existentialists on their own ground and held them to a draw.”<sup>7</sup> The key image of the desert sky, like “a solid thing up there, protecting us” from the nothingness beyond, is instantly recognizable as an evocation of the godless universe held temporarily at bay (94). Thanks to Vittorio Storaro’s astonishing cinematography, it becomes

as much a star of the film as either of the lead actors, whose movements are repeatedly framed against its breathtaking expanse. The spatial contrast between the human scale of the characters and the immeasurable regions where much of the action takes place complements a temporal contrast, which is introduced by the ingenious credit sequence, a montage constructed from newsreel footage of 1940s New York. Accompanied by Lionel Hampton's "Midnight Sun"—music immediately evocative of its era—these are images of a precise moment, their temporal specificity made manifest by their status as historical documents showing one thing after another that is either no longer the same or no longer there at all: the midcentury skyline, the Automat, the period vehicles, the fashions of the day. They are densely packed, bustling images, none more so than the storm of confetti over a crowd in Times Square, which every reader of the novel will register as a celebration of the war's end. And though one can only smile at the clever device of bringing the sequence to a close with footage of a departing ocean liner (soon to be glimpsed in the background at anchor in North Africa), the clearest signal that the prologue has ended and the narrative proper begun is the shift to color stock, accompanied by the call of the muezzin at the fade-in of the first color image. Despite its hectic complexity and relentless change, the time-bound civilization that the characters are leaving is drawn with a monochrome pallet—gray and grayer, as Port would say.

At the other extreme, the stunning images in the latter part of the film, after Port has died and Kit been left to fend for herself, offer visions of a timeless world, a culture that has remained little changed for centuries, and the film evokes the feeling of eternity through a visual language reminiscent of the imagery devised by modern painters to suggest ideal realms, free of the clutter of history. One can be sure that these shots were in no way simple to obtain, yet they project an almost naïve, otherworldly simplicity: except for the traces of movement—camels wending their way through the dunes, a falling star—the distant view of a caravan at night under an enormous white moon could be a lost canvass by Henri Rousseau. Even more startling is the momentarily static shot that divides the screen horizontally between tawny ripples of sand across the bottom and cloud-dappled sky across the top, a pared-down composition that approaches the abstraction of color field painting with much the same intent to gesture toward elemental experience. The claim voiced by one of Bowles' contemporaries among the painters could be applied with equal appropriateness to the filmmakers' purpose here: "We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions."<sup>8</sup>

The dramatic function of this contrast between time-bound and timeless domains is spelled out in Bowles' voiceovers, which frame the narrative at the beginning and end of the film. The first is part of a passage that comes a little over a third of the way through the book. Removed from its original context, it has been shifted to one of the earliest scenes and thus accorded a degree of prominence that it doesn't enjoy in the novel:

Because neither [Kit] nor Port had ever lived a life of any kind of regularity, they both had made the fatal error of coming hazily to regard time as non-existent. One year was like another year. Eventually everything would happen.

(127)

The last, which accompanies the final scene of the film, is possibly the most haunting and certainly the most frequently quoted passage in Bowles' work:

because we don't know [when we will die], we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless.

(232)

Less a *carpe diem* than a melancholy recognition of the human tendency to be lulled into a false sense of permanence, the voiceover expresses an irony prepared by the many images of spacious vistas that lead up to this final scene: it all *seems* limitless, but it's not; and the assumption that life is without limits raises the threat of a failure to live.

The large theme of the inescapability of human transience is integral to Bertolucci's conception of the narrative. In his view, this is primarily the story of a relationship in crisis, a marriage ten years old and searching for its future, although a certain obliviousness to time, perhaps born of affluence (if we're to judge by the characters' mountains of luggage), has placed that future in doubt. Such is the implication of the remaining extract from the novel, again given the authority of Bowles' voice on the soundtrack and mute presence in the background of the scene, which occurs in a hotel dining room early in the film:

rather than make any effort to ease whatever small tension might arise between them, she determined on the contrary to be intransigent about everything. It could come about now or later, that much-awaited reunion, but it must be all his doing.

(127)

Not to be hurried, Kit thinks she has all the time in the world, but she's actually running out of time more quickly than she knows.

There's no question that, on one level, the novel is about a troubled marriage between two people with symmetrical strengths and weaknesses.

Kit is proud and stubborn but ultimately willing to follow her husband in matters as large as the decision to spend years wandering in the African desert (she would have preferred the Italian countryside); and Port is physically fearless and adventurous when it comes to places and people, as we learn from his hazardous interlude with the prostitute, Marhnia, but somewhat at a loss in trying to figure out how to hold onto his wife, who has become the object of Tunner's erotic ambitions. The novel elaborates on this last point in a passage that is not used as a voiceover in the film but easily could have been:

Everything now depended on him. He could make the right gesture, or the wrong one, but he could not know beforehand which was which. Experience had taught him that reason could not be counted on in such situations. There was always an extra element, mysterious and not quite within reach, that one had not reckoned with. One had to know, not deduce. And he did not have the knowledge.

(124–25)

Offspring of a rational culture, Port and Kit are both forced to acknowledge that reason is of little use to them in the face of mystery. The film notes in passing and the novel explains in detail that Kit suffers from a complex form of self-consciousness: the victim of an ever-present sense of foreboding, she is intermittently aware of “the struggle that raged in her—the war between reason and atavism,” and on bad days the latter gains the upper hand to such an extent that she is at the mercy of superstition. “In intellectual discussions she was always the proponent of scientific method” (36), yet she sees the world as teeming with auguries, which pose such formidable difficulties of interpretation that she can only “eat, sleep, and cringe before her omens” (120). Though a defender of reason, she is predisposed toward madness from the start. Port, too, keeps life at a safe distance. He recognizes that his wife doesn't feel his yearning for the grandeur of the desert, which has driven their lives to this juncture, but against all evidence to the contrary still hopes that she will eventually come to share his tastes. Bowles sums up their impasse as follows: “just as she was unable to shake off the dread that was always with her, he was unable to break out of the cage into which he had shut himself, the cage he had built long ago to save himself from love” (93).

Various episodes chronicle the futile devices to which the uneasy couple resort in their efforts to sustain themselves in their separate worlds. If Port has built himself a protective cage, Kit takes refuge in a fortress. Arriving back at their rooms in a remote Saharan settlement, he is astonished to find that she has laid out all her belongings, including an elegant wardrobe and a full complement of cosmetics, and ordered a Scotch sent up, even though the whiskey is sure to be execrable, and there is no ice or soda for miles. In response, she remarks defiantly that she is “still an American,” is “not even

trying to be anything else,” and felt she would die if she “didn’t see something civilized soon” (155). Recognizing her mood, Port decides to humor her, albeit without any large degree of sympathy: “it amused him to watch her building her pathetic little fortress of Western culture in the middle of the wilderness” (156).

This episode is dramatized cursorily but intelligibly in the film; however, another scene, in which Port shows himself to be no less pathetic than his wife, sharply reveals the limitations of Bertolucci’s treatment of the material. In the novel, Port suddenly feels an overwhelming passion for a blind dancer, then becomes enraged when he misses the chance to arrange a liaison with her, and his Arab companion treats the matter lightly, unable to understand why anyone would be interested in such damaged goods. The episode receives a detailed exposition, the function of which is clearly to elucidate the psychology of the isolated protagonist: “Now that she was gone, he was persuaded, not that a bit of enjoyment had been denied him, but that he had lost love itself” (132). There follows one of those passages, so common in this author’s work, that are no less disturbing than they are convincing, as if Bowles had set out to leave his readers in a state of queasy revulsion before something that they can’t stomach but also can’t quite dismiss:

in bed, without eyes to see beyond the bed, she would have been completely there, a prisoner. He thought of the little games he would have played with her, pretending to have disappeared when he was really still there; he thought of the countless ways he could have made her grateful to him. And always in conjunction with his fantasies he saw the imperturbable, faintly questioning face in its masklike symmetry. He felt a sudden shudder of self pity that was almost pleasurable, it was such a complete expression of his mood. It was a physical shudder; he was alone, abandoned, lost, hopeless, cold. Cold, especially—a deep interior cold nothing could change. Although it was the basis of his unhappiness, this glacial deadness, he would cling to it always, because it was also the core of his being; he had built the being around it.

(134–35)

It’s hard to think of another writer who slips the knife into a compromised character with such exquisite twists. First, Port’s whimsical fantasy of teasing his imagined lover with the advantage of sight is laid out in its full repugnance. Then, although we’ve just been informed that their tryst would have been the consummation of love itself, that noble sentiment is promptly deflated by the information that he envisages basking in her gratitude for his condescension. Finally, as the unrealized dream withers, he descends into self-pity and masochistically savors the coldness at “the core of his being,” which, in a reversal of the earlier metaphor that had him shut up in a cage



of his own making, is itself now a self-built enclosure around a frigid center. The ultimate irony, revealed only later, is that his chill turns out to be no mere emotional numbness but the first sign of a physical affliction considerably worse than blindness: the onset of the typhoid fever that will kill him.

The film presents this scene without commentary as a fever dream that Port experiences when illness is already upon him, and the result is that the spectacle of the blind dancer becomes an indecipherable piece of exoticism, whose effect on the protagonist is unspecified beyond his noticeable fascination. Such is the problem with this gorgeous but tedious film: stupendous images regularly appear before the viewer's eyes, but their dramatic function is negligible, rendering them less than compelling. Moreover, the sense that the richness of the drama doesn't match the extraordinary quality of the visuals is reinforced by the awkwardness of some of the writing. Bertolucci extolled the ability of his actors to inhabit their characters, yet in the early scenes the two principals wear their mildly stilted dialogue like ill-fitting clothes, and the disastrous decision to have John Malkovich commence his meditations on the sky in the middle of an awkward coupling is a blunder that few viewers will forgive (probably more than one has felt that a man who launches into philosophy at such a moment *deserves* death).<sup>9</sup> To be sure, Debra Winger's gift for transparency of feeling comes to the fore when she's called upon to deliver the raw emotions of the deathbed scene, and the supporting players (Campbell Scott as Tunner, Jill Bennett and Timothy Spall as the Lyles) give us their characters very much as one imagines them. Nevertheless, for all its visual brilliance, the film version of *The Sheltering Sky* is ultimately more notable for what is not there than for what is, and the discrepancy between the splendor of the imagery and the rudimentary telegraphing of Kit's psychology in the concluding section of the film makes an instructive contrast with the corresponding part of the novel.

In Bowles' version, Kit ironically becomes just the sort of prisoner that Port imagined making of the blind dancer, right down to the torment of her captor's unpredictable comings and goings; however, Bertolucci softens the emotional content of these scenes, making Kit's ordeal into something much less harrowing than it is in the book. There is evidence that the leftist director wanted to avoid portraying representatives of a non-Western culture in an unflattering light; but one doesn't escape Orientalist stereotypes so easily, and as more than one early reviewer pointed out, what he ended up with was a well-mannered example of a familiar genre narrative: an uptight Western female's sexual awakening at the hands of an exotic paramour.<sup>10</sup> As the film builds to a pitch of visual interest through imagery evocative of the older world into which Kit is drawn, there is no comparably rich development of her emotional experience but rather a simple three-stage process: she is grief-stricken at the loss of her husband; she is shyly delighted with the attentions of her new lover; and, eventually, she is left suspended between cultures when she can find no permanent place in the traditional life of the desert but can't face the thought of Tunner's renewed interest either.

Even though the general circumstances of Kit's removal from Belqassim's house are retained—his wives are no happier about her than Port was about Tunner—this is exactly the sort of starry-eyed idealization of a non-Western culture that the novel avoids.

By contrast, Bowles focuses on the upheaval in Kit's inner life following the death of her husband, and the difference from the film's uninspired rendering of her sequential moods is impossible to miss, even though this part of the book also has a Hollywood genre feel that momentarily points toward a different kind of narrative than the one that eventually develops: "A drum beat in the oasis. There would probably be dancing in the gardens later. The season of feasts had begun" (234).<sup>11</sup> In this theatrically ominous atmosphere, the erstwhile slave to her omens slips away from the disasters of her past life in an unexpectedly liberated frame of mind, stopping in the shadows only to listen to the relentless drums "with an inscrutable smile on her lips" (239). As a depiction of incipient madness, this borders on kitsch; however, once the character's psychology has been further elaborated, it becomes evident that the genre signals were deliberately misleading. No monsters are afoot, nor will Kit become a monster, despite the imaginary power that she assumes for herself. Instead, the danger turns out to be within her, for she will be catastrophically misled by a state of mind that Bowles describes with uncanny foresight, a psychological condition that would become all too familiar when the counterculture emerged into the mainstream a decade and a half later.

It's important to remember that Kit is a trauma victim, as the reader is barely encouraged to be any more aware of her true mental condition than she is. There is nothing here as obvious as Debra Winger's tear-stained face to remind us that she has just nursed her dying husband for days, only to step outside briefly, discover she's been locked out in the desert for the night with Tunner, and then return in the morning to a gruesomely contorted corpse. Horror, guilt, and the pain of bereavement give way to a state of unthinking distraction, which Bowles evokes through yet another of his many metaphors of consciousness sheltered from the unbearable knowledge of absence:

Resolutely she turned her mind away, refusing to examine it, bending all her efforts to putting a sure barrier between herself and it. Like an insect spinning its cocoon thicker and more resistant, her mind would go on strengthening the thin partition, the danger spot of her being.

(261)

Whereas Kit had once built a fortress of Western culture to support herself in her isolation, she now finds herself barred from an actual fortress at the moment of Port's death and then shields herself that much more desperately from the insupportable memory by constructing a mental enclosure of an even less rational and more atavistic type.

Remarkably, though, Kit experiences what would nowadays be called a state of denial as something like a state of grace. Her former debilitating self-consciousness, the paralyzing dread that any action she took might trigger unforeseeable and disastrous consequences, miraculously lifts; and when she climbs into an uninhabited garden and spontaneously decides to immerse herself in the moonlit pool, a sense of dreamlike and slightly suspect harmony comes over her. Faintly astonished “that her actions should go on so far ahead of her consciousness of them,” that all her movements “seemed the perfect expression of lightness and grace,” she is now aware of only a small voice whispering caution: “‘Look out,’ said a part of her. ‘Go carefully.’ But it was the same part of her that sent out the warning when she was drinking too much. At this point it was meaningless” (240). After completing her baptism and leaving her Edenic surroundings, she emerges with all the fervor of a recent convert:

Swiftly she walked along, focusing her mind on that feeling of solid delight that she had recaptured. She had always known it was there, just behind things, but long ago she had accepted not having it as a natural condition of life. Because she had found it again, the joy of being, she said to herself that she would hang on to it no matter what the effort entailed.

(242)

Bowles, an atheist of the most intransigent New England variety, here gives us in almost entirely secular terms a portrait of the damaged soul that fervently believes it has found salvation and clings with newly discovered zeal to that conviction.<sup>12</sup>

The religious overtones of Kit’s transformation, combined with the faint sense that she might be doing something akin to letting her taste for alcohol get the better of her (a factor in her earlier seduction by Tunner), prepare us for the possibility that she is ripe for exploitation by a spiritualist cult or fly-by-night church or maybe just ready for an old-fashioned descent into alcoholism. What she actually does is attach herself to a foreign culture, one as far removed as possible from the genteel Western edifice in which she had previously cowered; and upon doing so, she almost immediately becomes a piece of sexual property.<sup>13</sup> Worse, although she has to endure the repeated assaults of a disagreeable elder, the younger man under whose protection she eventually falls turns out to be a more competent seducer than Tunner, and the result is that in her traumatized state she does in fact succumb to the lure of addiction, though not, as it happens, addiction to alcohol. In these scenes, Bowles once again forces his readers to look straight at something that many would prefer not to see: “when he went away the delicious state of exhaustion and fulfilment persisted for a long time afterward; she lay half awake, bathing in an aura of mindless contentment, a state which she

quickly grew to take for granted, and then, like a drug, to find indispensable" (286). Where Bertolucci discovered the inspiration for a love story, Bowles unveils less heartwarming developments:

Spinning a fantasy as she lay there, she made [Belqassim] come in the door, approach the bed, pull back the curtains—and was astonished to find that it was not Belqassim at all who climbed the four steps to join her, but a young man with a composite, anonymous face. Only then she realized that any creature even remotely resembling Belqassim would please her quite as much as Belqassim himself.

(287–88)

A woman addicted to a man—or perhaps just to a certain male erotic presence—opens a realm of degradation that is the farthest imaginative terrain the novel will explore.

Having traveled through such disquieting territory, the story ends on an ambiguous note, after Kit, who has been airlifted to Oran in a near catatonic state, suddenly comes to life in a panic at the thought that she is about to be reunited with Tunner and disappears again when she is left momentarily unattended. The final sentences trace the progress of a streetcar, which we cannot be sure Kit has boarded, through the Europeanized center of the city, past the crowds in the streets, and up the hill to the Arab quarter, where it comes to a stop at the end of the line. The image of the traveler with which the novel began provides the closing image as well, but the attractive idea that one might pick and choose from among the wealth of the world's cultures and come away with only the best of each is nowhere to be found.

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Until recently, Bowles has been the odd man out in American literature of his era, and even some of the recent interest in his work has had a cautious feel, as if a wild animal were being admitted to the house but on a short leash. He has been given his due, for example, as a pioneer of gay fiction, though mostly on the strength of his appalling short story "Pages from Cold Point" (1949), in which a teenager seduces his own father, possibly with the aim of getting him to finance an apartment (the piece will not figure high on the reading list of those seeking mainstream acceptance for gay families). Others have taken the opposite tack by prosecuting him on charges of unreconstructed Orientalism, and at first glance he might seem to be such a flagrant offender that it's almost embarrassing to say so.<sup>14</sup> He regularly portrays North Africans as spontaneous, animalistic, casual in matters of appetite, and prone to a violence that is barely held in check by an all-but-militaristic religion (though also gentle, thoughtful, creative,

tolerant, and many other things as well). It's no exaggeration to say that few Westerners have known North Africa as intimately as Bowles did, and his attitude toward his chosen place of residence is not disdainful or patronizing (for contrast, he offers more than one version of the conventional colonialist mentality—in *The Sheltering Sky*, Lieutenants d'Armagnac and Broussard represent the libertine and ascetic extremes). Instead, he simply acknowledges the culture's resistance to assimilation by anyone not born into it. For him, it is a subject of constant, indeed lifelong study but one that can never be entirely mastered. Given these views, a strict moralist might conclude that one shouldn't write about North Africa at all, but Bowles is not that kind of moralist. He accepts that his North African characters exist no more independently of his fantasies than do any of his other imagined beings, so he fantasizes about them freely, albeit with considerable first-hand knowledge and complete awareness of what he's doing. Thus, he consciously enacts Edward Said's thesis that Western representations of the East are a mirror held up to the West: his work gives us an uncensored view not of North Africa but of himself.<sup>15</sup>

Critics have often complained that Bowles' characters seem to have no background or history, but there is a reason. Despite its realistic surface, *The Sheltering Sky* is not a realist novel at all, nor is it veiled autobiography, as Bertolucci insinuated when he had his leading lady made up to resemble Jane Bowles. Rather, it is a psychodrama, a projection of its author's truly unusual mind, and it would be misleading to try to place this or any of Bowles' other writings within the major traditions of American fiction.<sup>16</sup> One notes with interest that among the directors who expressed a desire to adapt *The Sheltering Sky* to the screen before Bertolucci took on the project was David Lynch.<sup>17</sup> The surrealist heritage is primary, and Bowles more than once patiently explained that the grotesqueries in his work don't mean that he endorses violence and cruelty but are a way of startling the mind into dropping its defenses and allowing the author to insert his profoundly unsettling imagery. Once the sentences have been read, who can forget the hostile, deformed little "creature" with pincer arms that threatens the protagonist of "By the Water" and is shoved away across the pool deck, "making efforts with its neck to keep from reaching the edge of the platform"?<sup>18</sup> Or the professor of linguistics who, in "A Distant Episode," has his tongue cut out by desert bandits and becomes a performing animal, draped with "a series of curious belts made of the bottoms of tin cans strung together"?<sup>19</sup> The resonant details no less than the unflappable tone in which they're delivered are as telling as the horrors they accompany. They are what stick most stubbornly in the memory, however much one might care to dislodge them.

I have suggested that in *The Sheltering Sky* Bowles employs the occasional kitsch genre motif, which, like the tin cans that adorn the professor-turned-circus bear, is pressed into service in disconcerting apposition to the potent shocks that he inflicts on the reader (much as in a David Lynch film

the conventions of film noir and innocents-in-peril stories call up associations that become part of the collage of surreal juxtapositions). A considerably more prominent narrative technique, the *style indirect libre*, returns us to the question of the author's relationship to his characters; and another of Bowles' stories from the same period, "The Circular Valley," could almost be a commentary on his supremely assured, even ostentatious handling of this familiar device. In the story, an immortal and rather inquisitive spirit called the Atlájala successively inhabits the human beings who venture into the deserted valley of the title and directs their lives without their knowledge but with lethal consequences.<sup>20</sup> The narrative voice of *The Sheltering Sky* is much like that disembodied spirit, with no identity of its own but a will to take over and ventriloquize each of the characters in succession, devoting whole chapters even to those, like Lieutenant d'Armagnac and Tunner, for whom we are meant to feel no great esteem. The result is that the shifting perspectives call attention to the pliability of the voice itself, referring the reader back to the informing sensibility behind the narrative. Eventually, the awareness of a governing authorial presence becomes inescapable when one encounters the least expected plot development in the book—the decision to kill off the ostensible protagonist well before the end. In fact, one could profitably ask a freshman-level question about *The Sheltering Sky*: Who is the protagonist? The answer is not freshman-level, for the novel has a dual protagonist who is also one (Port/Kit). Bertolucci wasn't the only reader to jump to the conclusion that Port can be identified with the composer-author and that Kit is a portrait of his wife; but in the novel Port is neither a composer nor much of an author, and Bowles' initial sketch of Kit points to other possibilities: "Small, with blond hair and an olive complexion, she was saved from prettiness by the intensity of her gaze" (7). The description sounds less like Jane Bowles than like the young Bowles himself, whose photographs are marked by an exaggerated stare.

If on one level *The Sheltering Sky* is about the final days of a troubled marriage and is organized around the existentialist themes of time, self-deception, and the absurd universe, on another level it is something else again—a poem of disruption, degradation, and loss; exit music to accompany the fall of the towering fortress of Western culture. On this level, the narrative is a journey through the interior landscape of its creator, and to map the landmarks of that unnerving region, one must be attuned to an entirely different set of themes and prepared to recognize the characteristic imagery in which they are expressed. A convenient way to enter this dimension of the book is through its most classically surrealist feature: the dream that, at the very beginning of the novel, Port relates to his two companions, the first, Tunner, a willing listener, and the second, Kit, a most *unwilling* one. It is recounted in three segments, each separated by voyeuristically encouraging remarks from Tunner and stronger expressions of protest from Kit, whose fear of the irrational moves her to object to the whole performance:

It was daytime and I was on a train that kept putting on speed. I thought to myself: "We're going to plough into a big bed with the sheets all in mountains." . . . And I was thinking that if I wanted to, I could live over again—start at the beginning and come right on up to the present, having exactly the same life down to the smallest detail. . . . So I said to myself: "No! No!" I couldn't face the thought of all those God-awful fears and pains again, *in detail*. And then for no reason I looked out the window and heard myself say: "Yes!" Because I knew I'd be willing to go through the whole thing again just to smell the spring the way it used to smell when I was a kid. But then I realized it was too late, because while I'd been thinking "No!" I'd reached up and snapped off my incisors as if they'd been made of plaster. The train had stopped and I held my teeth in my hand, and I started to sob. You know those terrible dream sobs that shake you like an earthquake?

(9–10)

Port's dream is, first of all, the answer to a question, but it's the kind of answer that raises a host of further questions. In the opening sentences of the novel, he comes to consciousness alone, following an afternoon nap in a hotel room, and feels "the certitude of an infinite sadness at the core of his consciousness, but the sadness was reassuring because it alone was familiar" (3). The conventional expectation, raised by innumerable realist novels, is that this man's sadness will be explained by something in his past, an event that has haunted him for years and that, when finally disclosed, will provide the key to his nature. The explanation never comes, though, and we learn nothing of substance about the character's history; instead, the reader is treated to a game of interpretation. The dream explains the sadness, but the dream is obviously in need of explanation itself, and many pages later Port comes up with a satisfying one—to him at least, if not necessarily to the reader:

The train that went always faster was merely an epitome of life itself. The unsureness about the no and yes was the inevitable attitude one had if one tried to consider the value of that life, and the hesitation was automatically resolved by one's involuntary decision to refuse participation in it.

(66–67)

This is an interpretation straight out of the less inspiring pages of the existentialist's handbook. The initial affirmation of the Nietzschean eternal return in the dream is rejected in favor of a slightly smug refusal to engage. It's "too late" because the train is unstoppable; there *is* no going back, and as we will be reminded by the later passage about that "certain afternoon of your childhood," even one's richest early memories are destined to be revisited only a limited number of times. Yet the definitiveness of Port's

interpretation is immediately thrown into question by what follows: "He wondered why it had upset him; it was a simple, classic dream. The connections were all clear in his head. Their particular meaning with regard to his own life scarcely mattered" (67). If the reader had any remaining doubts about the distance between the author and his apparent representative in the fiction, these remarks must dispel them. There is a controlling spirit here, articulating the character's thoughts, pointing up their inadequacy, and even ridiculing him a little for his self-satisfied obliviousness ("He was pleased to have solved his little problem").

The author's mockery seems well earned if one takes into account Port's situation at the moment when he comes up with his interpretation. He's in a car trying to distract himself not only from his dreadful fellow motorists, the Lyles, but also from thoughts of his wife, who at that very moment is actually *on* a train in the process of being seduced by Tunner. The image of a train plowing into an enormous pile of bedsheets has connotations that an incipient cuckold might very well prefer not to contemplate. But the inadequacies of Port's interpretation are even more glaring than that, for how can he disregard the decisive detail of his "snapped off" incisors, from which the wellspring of his sorrow seems to flow? The vulgar Freudian reading of this last item as an image of castration is certainly not irrelevant, although it would be wise to keep in mind the pitfalls of resorting to such a blandly generalizing interpretation when dealing with an author who has given us, among other atrocities, an actual castration, presented in sickening detail (see "The Delicate Prey"). In that story too, however, the violence of the unspeakable act is only a preliminary, a way of softening us up for the final image: the head of the perpetrator sticking up out of the desert sand where the rest of him has been buried in retaliation for his offense. Slowly baking in the sun, it's singing.

Port's detachable teeth, held in the palm of his hand and contemplated with inexpressible sadness, are more like that singing head than like the castration that precedes it: a precise image that resonates in a variety of ways. It is indeed an image of the loss of potency (no surprise in the dreamworld of a man worried about losing his wife), but it's also an image associated with old age and physical decay. Death haunts the dream as it does the entire novel. Finally, there are the connotations of the comparison that Port himself introduces in narrating the event: he snaps off his incisors "as if they'd been made of plaster." And with this detail the associations of the dream imagery expand outward to call our attention to the many other images of detached body parts and bodies turned into material objects or machines that permeate the novel. In the latter category, there is the unedifying spectacle of Eric Lyle being chastised and ordered around by his mother, which "Port watched, fascinated as always by the sight of a human being brought down to the importance of an automaton or a caricature" (46). Far more startling is Kit's visit to the third-class carriage on the train, where among the crowd of poor Arabs she discovers a gallery of amputations and



absences, including “a wildfaced man holding a severed sheep’s head, its eyes like agate marbles staring from their sockets,” as well as “the most hideous human face she had ever seen,” that of a man with “a dark triangular abyss” instead of a nose (77–78). Later, in the course of performing his colonial duties, Lieutenant d’Armagnac is confronted with the problem of a dead newborn, which he comes upon in the process of being dismembered by dogs. All these images are preparatory to the climactic one of Port’s own dead body, lying “in a strange position, his legs wound tightly in the bedcovers” (230)—a bedridden train that, like the streetcar in the book’s concluding image, has come to the end of the line.

In contrast to this unnerving family of images is the other detail in Port’s dream that his interpretation ignores: his memory of “the spring the way it used to smell when [he] was a kid.” This reminiscence belongs with a group of images that are distinct from the ones I have just enumerated but are linked to them in dialectical interplay, for these are images of purity and purification. “The sun is a great purifier,” Lieutenant d’Armagnac affirms. “With even a minimum of hygiene, people could be healthy here. But of course there is not that minimum. Unfortunately for us, d’ailleurs” (166). Extending this idea, a remarkable passage implies that purity is an intrinsic property of the desert landscape, which is inevitably sullied by the mere act of being experienced and thus invested with human meaning:

The rocks and the sky were everywhere, ready to absolve him, but as always he carried the obstacle within himself. He would have said that as he looked at them, the rocks and the sky ceased being themselves, that in the act of passing into his consciousness, they became impure.

(162)

On an entirely different level from the existentialist themes of the surface narrative, this dimension of the novel could be described as a quest for purity and a dramatization of its collapse into its opposite.

The scenes I have been examining offer an indication of the extent to which *The Sheltering Sky* exhibits a poetic counter-logic distinctly removed from the procedures of the conventional realist novel, and anyone who aims to provide a gloss on these subtle networks of connotation must beware of losing their specificity by allowing them to be swallowed up in a controlling set of conceptual categories. The goal in what follows is not to assign meanings that are somehow more definitive than Bowles’ own imagery but merely to broaden the field of associations in the hope of enriching our experience of the novel by identifying additional parallels outside of it. Indeed, one of the two works of speculative thought that may contribute to that goal, Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1980), is self-evidently a book with quasi-poetic ambitions of its own.<sup>21</sup> The other is among the most influential books in the canon of modern anthropology, Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966), and it is this groundbreaking work that offers the clearest initial

parallel. Douglas' book is a meditation on the power of ritual—itsself a parallel to the experience of literature—and at its heart is the question of why “religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence.”<sup>22</sup> Because all culture is a form of order and pattern, one might very well ask why it is that rituals so regularly involve the very things that spoil the order and break the pattern. Douglas' answer is that the introduction of disorder into a system opens the possibility of creating a new order, which is felt as a release from the devitalized purity of the old. “It is part of our condition,” she writes, “that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as a stone when we get it” (161). Consequently, impurity “symbolizes both danger and power,” for it not only disrupts the previously cherished order but also has the potential to result in a new and more vital purity (94).

These remarks offer a suggestive commentary on the frequent appearance of dirt, disease, and defilement in *The Sheltering Sky*. Clouds of dust (97) and swarms of flies (104) accompany the travelers; illness is never far away. Mrs. Lyle rather unexpectedly informs Port that her son suffers from “an infection,” possibly contracted from a male prostitute (82), and after Port himself falls ill, he is repeatedly brought into proximity with both human and animal waste. When the bus stops at a desert bordj, he spends a hellish interval in a filthy latrine, where an unseen insect runs across the back of his neck. Then, after he has collapsed entirely on the journey to El Ga'a, he is deposited in a stable with his hand resting on camel dung (183). El Ga'a itself has just endured an epidemic; as a result, the proprietress of the hotel refuses entry to Port and Kit at the first mention of disease (185–86). And when the moment of death arrives, it is evoked from the perspective of the dying man in startlingly visionary terms: “His cry went on through the final image: the spots of raw bright blood on the earth. Blood and excrement. The supreme moment, high above the desert, when the two elements, blood and excrement, long kept apart, merge” (229).

As Douglas observes, the journey of the wanderer outside the boundaries of his or her culture is a voyage both “into the disordered regions of the mind” and “beyond the confines of society. The man who comes back from these inaccessible regions brings with him a power not available to those who have stayed in the control of themselves and of society” (95). That is, *if* he comes back. Some, like Port, do not; and some of those who do are, like Kit, in no condition to remake themselves and their world on the basis of a new and expanded order. Douglas quotes a saying of the Nyakyusa people that could be an epigraph to Kit's state of mind in the latter part of the novel: “The dead, if not separated from the living, bring madness on them” (176). In what is said to be characteristic of societies that place a materialistic emphasis on health and worldly goods, the mythology of this normally fastidious tribe associates madness with death and filth, which the Nyakyusan madman, in the most demonstrative sign of his affliction, strips off his clothes and eats (not surprisingly, Nyakyusan funeral rites involve

symbolically accepting the decay of the corpse by sweeping dirt upon the mourners). This is precisely the danger that Kit has faced, but she has no effective rites at her disposal to bring about the prescribed separation and healing, so she strips off her clothes and proceeds with her own debasement. Even under the best of circumstances, those who undergo trials that lead them “to turn round and confront the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up and to recognize them for the fictive, man-made, arbitrary creations that they are” run the risk of continuing indefinitely in a state of disorder (169–70). *The Sheltering Sky* is sometimes described as a “cult” novel. If so, it is a cult whose rituals have no clear resolution.

Kristeva picks up the description where Douglas leaves off—on the threshold of those same “disordered regions of the mind,” which she depicts in psychoanalytic terms. Instead of purity and order, she substitutes the Freudian superego or law of the father, and instead of impurity and disorder, she elaborates a theory of the abject, accounting for the force of these experiences by locating their origins in the earliest stages of human psychic development. This is potentially a useful approach to a writer like Bowles, for whom convenient labels like “gay” or, even worse, “bisexual”—the verbal equivalent of throwing up one’s hands before something that one doesn’t fully understand—seem inadequate. It may be that the compelling quality of his imagery derives from its genesis in a period of life that predates the formation of any definite sexual identity (although the relevance of such sketchy pieces of biographical information as the story that, in a curious foreshadowing of his protagonist’s chilliness, his father tried to kill him as an infant by leaving his cradle in an open window during a blizzard remains a matter of speculation).<sup>23</sup> Suggestions like these are not provable in any strict sense, but one can at least bring the evidence before the reader’s eyes.

Abjection, according to Kristeva, is a violent spasm of expulsion, an expression of preverbal disgust, which dates from a time of life when there is no clear separation from the mother, and the infant exists in an undifferentiated space that more than one specialist has described as a kind of floating world of body parts, fluids, and other primal matter. On the way to establishing itself as an individual human consciousness with a separate identity of its own, the child must expel its mother’s stifling presence in an anguished effort that occurs prior to the assumption of a place in the paternal realm of language and culture, which may be experienced as objectionable in its own right—distant, forbidding, and stern (or even, in an extreme case like that of Bowles himself, downright threatening). In a suggestive passage, Kristeva notes that the abject individual’s relation to the external domain of society is fundamentally manipulative: “Abjection . . . is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you” (4). This is not

a principled, heroic rejection of the law so much as a conniving perversion of desire and social convention: “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (15). One thinks not only of the regular appearance of all forms of sexual commerce in *The Sheltering Sky*—the theater marquee announcing a film entitled *Fiancée for Rent*; the prostitute, Marhnia, and her pimp, Smail; the brothel where Port encounters the blind dancer; and Kit’s negative apotheosis as “a piece of property” (271)—but also of Eric Lyle’s disgraceful schemes and apparently incestuous relationship with his mother. The incompetent swindler, a grown man described as shapeless, somehow half-developed, and united in a bond of mutual loathing with a mother from whom he cannot detach himself, is the embodiment of abjection in its social form.

The abject is at its most vivid, however, not in forms of contemptible social behavior but in images of confrontation with non-human, cast-off matter, like Kit’s glimpse of the Arabs on the train who gaze at her with “the absorbed and vacant expression of the man who looks into his handkerchief after blowing his nose” (76).<sup>24</sup> This is most typically an oral imagery, and *The Sheltering Sky* offers numerous accounts of revolting meals, as during that same scene when Kit, in the process of eating a sandwich herself, unwisely happens to look over at a man who is noisily crunching red locusts (77), or when at Ain Krorfa Port, Kit, and Tunner are served bowls of soup swimming with weevils (109). The aim of these images is not simply to disgust but also to establish the limits of modern Western culture. Most astonishingly, in the hallucinatory pages of the death scene (written, according to Bowles, after eating *majoun*), we are presented with an end-of-life imagery that seems to reprise, in a darker key, the characteristic experience of life’s earliest days: “the space was full of things . . . Sometimes he could touch them with his fingers, and at the same time they poured in through his mouth. It was all utterly familiar and wholly horrible—existence unmodifiable, not to be questioned, that must be borne” (217). At the same time, Port’s own body, as perceived by Kit (the dying protagonist’s better half, so to speak), becomes the very epitome of the abject:

For a while she studied the inert body as it lay there beneath the covers, which rose and fell slightly with the rapid respiration. “He’s stopped being human,” she said to herself. Illness reduces man to his basic state: a cloaca in which the chemical processes continue. The meaningless hegemony of the involuntary. It was the ultimate stretched out there beside her, helpless and terrifying beyond all reason. She choked back a wave of nausea that threatened her for an instant.

Kristeva's comments are instructive: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). When Port is deprived of his passport earlier in the novel and feels his social and human identity begin to erode, the mishap initiates a process that will end with this climactic event: his transformation into the ultimate unas-similable thing.

The antithesis of this imagery of decay is the class of exalted imagery that is realized so impressively in Bertolucci's film. "The abject," says Kristeva, "is edged with the sublime" (11). Although her main point of reference is Freudian (sublime/sublimation), the sublime is also being understood here according to its elaboration in eighteenth-century aesthetics—that is, as a way of bringing the perception of infinity under control by experiencing it as an uplifting image, tinged, in this account, with the radiance of our earliest memories. One cannot take in the infinity of night, but one can form an impression of it and thus shield oneself from a crippling confrontation with limitless absence by finding refuge under the cover of a protective idea—the idea of the sheltering sky. The sublime image represented by the desert landscape, with its overarching dome of cerulean blue, is at the farthest reach of human consciousness, the very limit of the mystery, as is implied by the passage quoted earlier in which the rocks and sky are accorded a purity that will be tarnished even in being experienced. Beyond it, there is nothing but death. "The time of abjection is double," Kristeva observes: "a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (9). Or as Bowles puts it at the climax of the novel: "A black star appears, a point of darkness in the night sky's clarity. Point of darkness and gateway to repose. Reach out, pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky, take repose" (229).

There is an episode early in the book that seems to draw together all these motifs in a manner both evocative and elusive. This is the story of "Tea in the Sahara," which Marhnia asks Smail to relate to Port. Three girls from the mountains are consumed with the desire to have tea in the Sahara. They dance in cafés—these are, it is implied, prostitutes like Marhnia herself—but the men are all ugly and don't pay them well enough to finance their Saharan journey. One day a tall, handsome man arrives from the South, makes love to all three, and gives each a piece of silver, so that eventually they're able to pool their money to buy tea things and bus tickets. A caravan takes them deeper into the desert, and they press on even farther alone, unwilling to stop until they've reached the highest dune. When they arrive fatigued at the summit of a towering sandbank, they decide to rest a little before they have tea. Many days later, another caravan finds them lying where they rested, their three glasses filled with sand (29–31).

That final detail is yet another image of unappetizing nourishment, and the story would be nothing without it. Was life so dry and tasteless that these girls willingly brought about their own deaths? Or is this the story of a dangerous desire to step outside one's world and attain the farthest reaches

of an enticing vastness, a cautionary tale of reckless ambition that brought these three seekers only cups of sand? We're not told, and it's possible that both interpretations are relevant. At the beginning of the book, Port's own life is dry and tasteless to a point where the future seems to hold little in store, yet he too is a seeker after something his own world can't give him. That some have found his death moving, even though the author doesn't hesitate to expose his faults, is evidence not only of Bowles' achievement but also of the fascination of a journey beyond the confines of one's own culture in search of another way of life, even at the cost of death. Port's death is not the death of the square, as Mailer thought, but something more like the temporary passing of a dream—the dream of a counterculture—which would be energetically taken up by the other writers considered in this book. And while Bertolucci's film dramatizes only one of its superimposed layers, Bowles' richly disturbing narrative of a catastrophic flight from isolation and decay nevertheless makes a fitting prologue to the various achievements of his contemporaries.

## Notes

- 1 Preface to *The Sheltering Sky*, 65th Anniversary Edition, xviii. All further citations appear in the text.
- 2 *Advertisements for Myself*, 419.
- 3 Paul Bowles to Rena Bowles, December 6, 1961. Quoted in Virginia Spencer Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 266.
- 4 *Paul Bowles—An American in Tangier*, dir. Mohamed Ulad-Mohand (1993).
- 5 There is evidence that this distinction was similarly familiar to Paul and Jane Bowles, as a passage from *Two Serious Ladies* suggests: “‘Tourists, generally speaking,’ Mrs. Copperfield had written in her journal, ‘are human beings so impressed with the importance and immutability of their own manner of living that they are capable of traveling through the most fantastic places without experiencing anything more than a visual reaction. The harder tourists often find that one place resembles another.’” Jane Bowles, *Collected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2017), 39.
- 6 In pre-revolutionary Algeria, Eckmühl was the name of a neighborhood in Oran (now called Muhieddine), in which could be found a Place Noiseux. Bowles was briefly a visitor in the early 1930s. See Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping* (New York: Harper Collins, 1972), 126.
- 7 Florence Codman in *Commonweal*, quoted in Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life*, 208.
- 8 Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now,” *Tiger’s Eye*, 1.6 (1948): 53.
- 9 The director’s praise for the lead actors is recorded in the “Featurette” that accompanies the 2016 DVD release of the film.
- 10 See Vincent Canby’s review, in which the film is described as “a sort of existential update on Rudolph Valentino’s old chestnut, ‘The Sheik’” (*New York Times*, December 12, 1990). Pauline Kael was less complimentary, especially on the subject of the director’s high-minded restraint: “Bertolucci has lost interest in pace and excitement and verve. He’s up to something moral.” (*The New Yorker*, December 17, 1990). Apparently, Tuareg tribesmen who worked on the film convinced the director of the gentleness of their culture, inspiring him to rewrite the final scenes. Viewers who are also readers can judge for themselves which

is the more egregious fantasy. See Nancy Keefe Rhodes, "A Second Take: *The Sheltering Sky*," [www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/asecondtake/the-sheltering-sky.htm](http://www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/asecondtake/the-sheltering-sky.htm).

- 11 Bowles was almost certainly thinking of the seasonal celebrations of the Moroccan religious confraternities called "brotherhoods," which he first witnessed in Fez in 1932. At that time, he was living shut up in his host's residence for entire days during which no one was allowed in or out, much as Kit is forced to live in Belqassim's house (see *Without Stopping*, 150–51). Yet, however grounded these scenes may be in historical, social, and biographical fact, we're in a 1930s horror film here.
- 12 Bowles' difficult upbringing, which resulted in an undying enmity toward his father, has been the subject of much discussion; however, in the spiritual domain a more relevant influence would seem to have been that of his maternal grandfather, August Winnewisser, a gruff German whose own father had settled in Connecticut in the aftermath of 1848. At family gatherings, the old man was in the habit of calling the children around him and asking who among them believed in God. After the eager-to-please types had raised their hands, he would berate them as fools. See *Without Stopping*, 11–12.
- 13 On the vogue of Westerners seeking salvation in the East during the 1960s and after, see Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (New York: Vintage International, 1990). In this second edition of her book, Mehta begins with an anecdote about a troubled American woman who went to India in search of enlightenment and within days found herself undergoing an ordeal strikingly similar to Kit's.
- 14 See Colm Tóibín, "Avoid the Orient," *London Review of Books* (January 4, 2007). Tóibín's article, ostensibly a review of Virginia Spencer Carr's biography of Bowles (although the book is never mentioned), is actually a furious attack on Bowles himself, who is said to be thoroughly guilty of "the sin of Orientalism," among other offences. One can only guess at what sins are being expiated in this surprising performance.
- 15 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- 16 In this respect, the American writer to whom Bowles is closest is his younger contemporary John Hawkes, whose own first novel, *The Cannibal*, was published the same year as *The Sheltering Sky*. If there is a relevant American tradition here, it's the one that begins with Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe, a tradition that has been at least as important in French as in American literature.
- 17 See Bob Spitz, "Last Tango in Tangier," *New York Times Magazine* (May 20, 1990).
- 18 Paul Bowles, *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1950), 271.
- 19 *The Delicate Prey*, 302.
- 20 *The Delicate Prey*, 122–34.
- 21 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). All further citations appear in the text.
- 22 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1966), 159. All further citations appear in the text.
- 23 See *Without Stopping*, 38–45.
- 24 Norbert Elias reminds us of how recently the feelings of revulsion associated with this habit have arisen in the "civilized" culture that Bowles is deliberately flouting by the use of such imagery: "Once the handkerchief begins to come

into use [in the sixteenth century], there constantly recurs a prohibition on a new form of 'bad manners' that emerges at the same time as the new practice—the prohibition on looking into one's handkerchief when one has used it." See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (1939), trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 149. My thanks go to Jeffrey Freedman for pointing out the historical significance of this image.